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Review: Half Full or Half Empty?

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BOOK REVIEWS

HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?

Sedna oder die Liebe zum Leben. By HANS PETER DUERR. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984. Pp. 535.

In this provocative and fascinating book, Hans Peter Duerr resumes, in a new perspective, one of the most intriguing questions already asked in his *Traumzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978; see my "Marvelous Ointments of Dr. Duerr," *History of Religions* 22 [1982]: 100–101): what is the difference between us and primitive man, insofar as our attitude toward life is concerned? Let us remember that *Traumzeit*'s project was an ambitious one: to make a theory of culture in contradiction to the well-known theory of Norbert Elias, according to which the development of Western society was marked by a constantly increased tightening and differentiation of controls, leading gradually to a higher level of social differentiation and integration. On the contrary, Duerr was able to show that the fundamental process in the sociogenesis of the West was a shift in the traditional relationship between "inside" and "outside." For a long time in the history of Western civilization, "inside" and "outside" were dialectically linked to the extent that there was no "inside" (society) without an "outside" (wildness). In the process of civilization, the importance of wildness as a metasytem posing the values of society is no longer recognized. Wildness is gradually driven back into the unconscious and identifies itself with the unconscious. This way, the "outside" is subjectified, interiorized; it becomes "the inside of the inside" (*Traumzeit*, pp. 60–61).

The solution of one of the major problems raised by *Traumzeit* was left to *Sedna*: if rituals of renewal seem to be permeated by an immense lust for life, when and why did those religions appear in which this feeling was replaced by an intense contempt for life, which was viewed as sheer suffering? (The most common examples of the latter are Buddhism and Christendom, which are rather reduced, in Duerr's inquiry, to a sample of extreme examples gathered from antinomian mystics or trends.) In order to find an answer to this question, Duerr attempts a pertinent, though bold, reconstruction of the religious hopes and rituals of prehistoric man, compared with those of primitive hunters known from anthropological reports. Duerr comes to the conclusion that, for both primitive hunters (*Wildbeuter*, the German term, sounds better and is more accurate) and prehistoric man, the major religious event was the renewal of game (later cattle), which was ceremonially accomplished by ritual intercourse, either individual (a sort of hierogamy) or collective (orgy). In the cases when women were involved, their male partners were supposed to impersonate animal spirits, which were often represented as bulls. The vital force of these spirits was further transmitted by women (through intercourse) to their husbands (Pasiphaë ritual). In the cases when men were involved, their female partners were supposed to impersonate a great goddess of nature or her substitutes, spenders of life. The conclusion of this part of Duerr's book (pp. 151–277), which is substantiated by a huge amount of information, masterfully selected to suit the whole demonstration, is that prehistoric man and his successor, primitive hunter, were lovers of life.

Among cattle breeders and peasants, a new feeling replaced reverence for life: a feeling of impermanence which led to a metaphysical refusal of life. It was this metaphysical refusal that allegedly brought about the modern disenchantment of the world and nihilism. Duerr's intention is to give primitive lust for life as a positive example to a world in which nihilistic forces have produced a certain negation of life, which amounts to contempt for life. Duerr seems to prefer by all means the joyous intercourses of primitive hunters to the "depersonalization" of different mystics in different religions of the world that preach now or have preached in the past contempt for life, viewed as suffering. This second part of Duerr's book (pp. 231–61) is much shorter, witty and paradoxical, full of suggestive quotations, but far less accurate than the first parts that feature the primitive hunter and prehistoric man. Too many materials from too many antinomian mystics and religious trends are brought into a too small and unrepresentative picture, and the analogies between them are, in some cases, rather superficial.

From *Traumzeit* to *Sedna*, Duerr's method has not undergone any substantial change: the text is relatively short (250 pages), followed by 165 pages of notes and 75 pages of bibliography, containing some 2,200 references.

Duerr's conclusion is easy to summarize: hunters were optimists, they thought the glass of life was half full; agriculturalists were pessimists, they thought the glass was half empty (pp. 238–39). I do not intend to discuss Duerr's whole theory since the fact that his demonstration failed to convince me could be misleading. As a matter of fact, Duerr's book is certainly one of the most beautiful and stimulating books I have ever happened to read. This

does not mean that I can agree with either the premises or the consequences of his demonstration. From a lot of material I happen to know about primitive hunters, I am not quite sure that they were optimistic. (To put it plainly, I am sure on several occasions they were not.) I also am not sure whether agriculturalists were as pessimistic as that. (On a lot of occasions they surely were not.) Nor, for that matter, am I sure whether intercourse is always to be held as an expression of lust for life (which was one of the major arguments in Duerr's theory). I simply think that it is up to the researcher to see the glass half full or half empty, and Duerr is prone, on different occasions, to see the same glass in different ways. As far as his own glass is concerned, this is certainly more than half full, and the reader will take an intense pleasure in emptying it.

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ON THE VENERATION OF FOREST MONKS IN THAI BUDDHISM

The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism and Millennial Buddhism. By STANLEY JEYARAJA TAMBIAH. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Pp. xi+417.

This volume takes Stanley Tambiah further afield in the same milieu as his *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*. A substantial part of it deals with the life and meaning of Phra Acharn Mun (1870–1949) a forest monk and wandering saint of northeast Thailand. In part 1, there is a survey of classical Buddhist notions of the *arahant*, the path of purification, the history of forest monks, and other elements of the background needed to understand the modern Thai veneration of world-renouncing monks. Part 2 deals with Phra Acharn Mun's biography and its religious significance. Part 3 moves on to deal with the cult of amulets and seeks an explanation and account of the popularity of this phenomenon. Part 4 takes up some conceptual and theoretical issues, for example, over the nature of charisma. The book as a whole gives a rich picture of Buddhism in action in Thai society and illustrates through the themes mentioned the interplay between social changes and the traditional ideals of the Buddhist order. In this review I shall concentrate on some theoretical issues important in the history of religions.

His theoretical analysis can be briefly stated as follows. The cult of the holy person is part of millennial Buddhism, which exists in dialectical interplay with establishment Buddhism as a volatile and critical counterculture. The arahant figure, here represented by Phra Acharn Mun, is linked as an indexical symbol backward to the Buddha and forward through his biographer into contemporary piety. But the charisma of the holy man is not something simply routinized, as Weber would have it, through bureaucratic Sangha structures, but forms the basis of the cult of amulets. Here charisma is condensed into objects, which by being blessed by the holy man and by reflecting